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SENTITIVE

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - ARS Delegation Arrives in Mogadishu, Rallies
Support

REF: A) Nairobi 2543 B) Nairobi 2755

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On December 10, ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif Ahmed and more than twenty other ARS leaders arrived in Mogadishu. This is expected to be a permanent relocation. Sheikh Sharif was encouraged to make the journey by supporters, who urged immediate action on the ground in light of recent inroads by al-Shabaab. Upon arrival at Mogadishu airport, Sharif was warmly welcomed by residents, ARS supporters and TFG administrators. The ARS delegation was composed of members of both the High Level Committee (HLC) and the Joint Security Committee (JSC,) who joined their TFG counterparts already in Mogadishu. Although an armed group associated with Asmara-based elements of the ARS launched an attack in Mogadishu, Sharif and the others were unharmed. The Embassy released a public statement (paragraph 9) in support of the ARS mission. End Summary.

Relocating Base to Mogadishu

¶2. (SBU) Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, Chairman of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), led more than twenty ARS leaders in relocating to Mogadishu on December 10. This was Sharif's second trip to Somalia since the Islamic Courts Union was ousted in 2006. In late October, the Chairman visited Jowhar, in Middle Shebelle region, and Buloburde and Beletweyne towns in Hiran region (Ref A). Taking off from Djibouti, the ARS delegation landed at Mogadishu airport and was warmly welcomed by AMISOM, ARS and Islamic Court supporters, members of the Transitional Federal Government, including Police Commissioner General Abdi Awale Qeybdiid, and Benadir regional administrators. Sheikh Sharif and some members of the group are staying at Lafweyne Hotel in north Mogadishu while the rest of the ARS leaders are staying at Nasahablood Hotel near K4 junction in south Mogadishu.

¶3. (SBU) An ARS leader and member of the JSC told us that due to the recent inroads by al-Shabaab and other armed groups into the territory that Islamic Courts-allied groups had previously controlled (Ref B), Sharif supporters from the region came to Djibouti to express the seriousness of the situation. These ARS commanders convinced Sharif of the immediate need to take action on the ground and to demonstrate practical progress on the Djibouti process. So far, the visit has been very positively received by the public who after learning of the arrival, flooded live radio shows with calls of support.

¶4. (SBU) The trip was facilitated by the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) and UNPOS officials told us that this was not a visit, but a relocation of the ARS to Mogadishu. The ARS delegation included five from the HLC and four from the JSC and many other

members of the ARS Executive ommittee and Central Committee who were based in Djibouti after leaving Asmara earlier in the year. According to UNPOS, there are now 58 members of the HLC and the JSC who are now in Mogadishu. (Note: Several TFG ministers, officials, and MPs who are part of the committees were already in Mogadishu).

ARS Factions Oppose the Move

15. (SBU) Immediately upon arrival, Sheikh Sharif and the ARS leaders met with local elders and well-wishers, but the support is not universal. Early morning December 11, an armed group associated with the Asmara-based members of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS-A) launched mortar attacks on TFG bases at Villa Somalia in Mogadishu's Wardhigley district. The fighting is not in close proximity to where the ARS leaders are staying. Ten were reported killed and many others injured, though none in the ARS delegation.

16. (SBU) Abdirahim Isse Adow, a former Sheikh Sharif ally during the Union of Islamic Courts period and now ARS-A spokesman, claimed responsibility for the attack. Isse said Sheikh Sharif's arrival in Mogadishu was a betrayal of the "resistance cause" and that it showed he had sided with the "enemy" against Somalis. During a December 10 press interview, ARS-A leader Hassan Dahir Aweys did not answer the journalist's question of whether he sees Sheikh Sharif's visit as a bold political step towards reconciliation and one that will seal the DJ agreement. Aweys only spoke in general terms saying that a visit to Mogadishu now is siding with the enemy.

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17. (SBU) Prior to their departure from Djibouti, persons affiliated with ARS-A leaders contacted Sheikh Sharif and advised him to land at Iseley airstrip, about 20 km northeast of the capital, rather than Mogadishu airport. They suggested that many Somalis would take exception at Sharif landing at Mogadishu airport with AMISOM support. Sharif initially agreed as a gesture of good faith to reconcile with his former allies and encourage their support for the Djibouti process. The same persons later advised Sharif that security at Iseley airstrip could not be guaranteed because it is controlled by no particular faction. Recognizing that these former allies were trying to delay the mission, Sharif moved forward with the planned departure and arrival at Mogadishu airport.

18. (SBU) While this move is intended to re-establish Sheikh Sharif and the ARS base to Mogadishu, Sharif (and other ARS leaders as required) are expected to travel to other parts of Somalia and internationally as the need arises. Sharif plans to hold a press conference to speak at length to the Somali people about his mission. One of Sharif's close confidants, who is also in Mogadishu, told us that under the leadership of Sheikh Sharif, the ARS is committed to finding a solution to the Somali problem. He said they are prepared to do whatever it takes to do find a peaceful solution, no matter the risks.

Mission Statement

19. (U) In support of the ARS mission into Mogadishu, Embassy Nairobi issued the following public statement:

ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's Return to Mogadishu

The U.S. government welcomes the December 10 return to Mogadishu of Chairman of the Alliance for the Re-liberation (ARS) of Somalia Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's presence in Mogadishu, after an absence of almost two years, is a practical step in the creation of a meaningful unity government.

We urge all Somalis to support the ARS's efforts to effect, in active cooperation with the Transitional Federal Government, reconciliation through the Djibouti Process. We urge as well those

groups and individuals who have opposed the peace process to join efforts to create a unity government and end the suffering in Somalia.

RANNEBERGER